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Turkey and Azerbaijan: On the Myth of Sharing the same Origin and Culture

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Abstract

This study looks at Turkish manuals and textbooks, approved by the Ministry of Education of Turkey and used at different levels of the education system, to compile clues regarding the potent identity questions assumed to exist in the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Textbooks serve as the main source for this study because the education system is the tool that strengthens the state's influence over its citizens. A nation-state's establishment of its own identity is a process that directly builds citizens' consciousness.

Keywords

Turkish Identity, Azerbaijani Identity, Armenian-Turkish Relations, Turkism, Turkishness

Introduction

In the establishment of the Turkish Republic's national identity, "Turkishness", along with Anatolia as the place where it was built and reproduced, plays a crucial role. History serves as one of the foundational elements of this identity, starting in Central Asia and including migrations, religious transformations, and the states that rose and fell. It culminates into the "perfect" state of Turkish Islamic civilisation in today's Anatolia.

Various competing concepts have been developed in accordance with the varying policies to classify and define other societies that speak Turkic languages and practice Islam. The "Captive Turks" concept was first used by some Turkish politicians and academics to describe the peoples of the former Soviet republics, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, where Turkic languages are spoken (see Ayan 2011; Polat 2008). The "Soviet invasion" has been shown as the primary reason for the significant cultural, economic, and political distance between these states and Turkey, as well as the main

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excuse for any unjust event that the states in question may have experienced.

"Outside Turks" live outside the boundaries of the Turkish Republic. This conceptualisation refers to a homogeneous Turkish identity that stems from the same roots, shares a common culture, and speaks the same language. As a result of such an understanding, it is suggested that Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks and Kazaks are all Turkish peoples, ignoring all differences regarding culture, religion, and language. Turkey is the centre of this perception of "Turkishness", the model of the super-ordinate identity presented to other Turkic societies. For this reason, some Turkish politicians and academics argue that "Outside Turks" are in need of Turkey's protection, and only Turkey can provide a model for them (Gömeç 2007: 120).

Conceptions of "Captive Turks" and "Outside Turks", as political expressions of national identity, highlight "otherness" rather than "brotherhood". In this study we focus on the "hierarchical" relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which is defined as "Single Nation, Two States" but has been subjected to "hidden otherisation" under Turkish national identity ideology. The question is examined during the post-Soviet time because Azerbaijan gained its independence during that period, hence the intensity and equality of the political relationship between two countries have increased, and secondly the relationship has developed an economic dimension with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline.

Textbooks and manuals approved by the Turkish Ministry of Education serve as the main source for this study, as the education system is the tool that strengthens the state's influence over its citizens. A nation-state's establishment of its identity is a process that directly builds citizens' consciousness.

The Issue of Common Origin, Culture and Language

The criteria of "common origin" and "common language/culture" maintain their centrality in the definition of nation-state identity. Considering this, Turkish researchers who study the origin of Turks have stated that they, as one of the oldest societies of the world, have established large states and formed great civilisations throughout history. According to them, Russians are the first people responsible for the dividedness of "Turks" who currently live in different countries and form separate Asian states:

> *When looking at Turkish history, it should not be understood as the history of a single society in a specific place, but as the combination of all the histories of Turkish (Turkic) communities with different names and in various*

regions that carry the same "national" culture with their religion, language, traditions, and customs. The Turkish (Turkic) nation, which has established many states and administrations throughout history, has been divided into parts with separate names because of Russian politics. ...As a result, names, such as "Uzbek", "Kazak", "Kyrgyz", "Turkmen", "Azerbaijani", etc. have been emerged, and these people are called by the names of their tribes, dynasties or their regions of habitation. It has been grafted into their minds that they are different peoples and they do not have any relationship with 'Turkishness' (Ulusoy 2009: 359)[1].

Regarding these "common origin", or the so-called common social memory and culture, can it be said that Turks and Azerbaijanis represent a single homogeneous group? Historically, the population of Aran and Shirvan (present-day Azerbaijan Republic) and the Turkic-speaking inhabitants of the north-western provinces of Iran, Aturpatakan, who are, in fact, the real "Azebaijanis", during many centuries, especially in the Safavid period, have been in permanent inimical relations with the Ottoman Turks. These groups, i.e. the peoples of Azerbaijan (Aturpatakan), the south-eastern Caucasus (Aran and Shirvan) and the Ottoman Turks not only competed but also represented two separate ideologies, respectively espousing Shi'ite and Sunni Islam. The only common social memory of these communities is that of the mutual war and massacres. For instance, the Ottoman Sultan Selim Yavuz who is the first Sunni sultan to hold the title of caliph,[2] in Azerbaijan Republic, in Iran and among Shi'ites of Turkey is remembered as a butcher.[3]

The people of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic has never been loyal to Turks and Turkishness., For instance, just in the beginning of the 20th century, the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) sought alliances under a Pan-Turkist ideology in the South Caucasus, but was not reciprocated by the people

[1] We keep the style and wording of the quotations from Turkish original.

[2] The relationship between the Ottomans and Safavids is depicted as follows in the seventh grade history textbook in Turkey: "Safavids in Iran sought the disintegration of Anatolia and the spread of Shi'ism. As a result of their activities, the Şahkulu Rebellion occurred in 1511. This rebellion was quelled only with many difficulties. The Safavid State continuously provoked the people in Anatolia during this period. The relationship between the Ottomans and Iran was disrupted by the Shi'ite activities in Anatolia conducted by Safavids. Yavuz Sultan Selim marched upon Iran, since he believed that Iran posed a threat. He won the Çaldıran War against Şah Ismail in 1514" (see http://trtarih.com/turk-tarihinde-yolculuk/7.-sinif-3.-unite-turk-tarihinde-yolculuk-konu-anlatimi-4.-bolum.html).

[3] According to Dedeyev (2009: 131), "Against the Safavid propaganda in the Ottoman State, Yavuz Sultan Selim had killed or imprisoned around forty thousand supporters of Şah Ismail.

there. Instead the latter allied with their co-religionists in Iran (Atabaki 2005: 33-42). This reveals that the identities of Azerbaijanis (or, to be more precise, the Turkic-speakers of Aran) and Turks have been formed upon different historical, ethnic and cultural substrates. Among these, the factor of religion plays here a very important role. The fact that most of the Azerbaijanis are Shi'ites, whereas Turks are Sunnis, has caused significant distance between these two turkophone communities. Azerbaijanis have preferred Iranians, who belong to the same religious ideology, instead of their "linguistic relatives", the Turks.

Finally, discussions regarding whether the official language of Azerbaijan should be "Turkish" or "Azerbaijani" or whether the people of Azerbaijan should be called "Azerbaijanis" or "Turks", continues long after the Soviet Union's disintegration. Those who oppose the idea that Azerbaijanis are Turks and their language is Turkish have stated:

> *The intellectuals who promote the slogan 'my language is my existence' have claimed that the people on the "other side" are trying to make Azerbaijan a colony of Turkey... Intellectuals and politicians from other ethnic groups, particularly Lezgi, Talish, Russian, and Kurdish, have been among those who defend the Azerbaijani identity against Turkish identity and language. As a matter of fact, in response to the Turkists' slogan 'hey Turk, shake and return to yourself, you will be great when you return to yourself', Lezgis, for instance, say 'hey, Lezgi, you will be great when you return to yourself too'* (Süleymanlı, 2006: 299-307).

The two states, Turkey and Azerbaijan Republic, display different political and academic approaches to the concept of the "common language". The following quote highlights the commonly accepted perspective on Azerbaijan among academics in Turkey: "Azerbaijani Turks, who speak a Turkish dialect that is unique to them, are a developed society in terms of language, art and literature..." (Devrimci et al. 1951: 84). While the Azerbaijani language is mentioned as a developed language, the author subordinates it by underlining that it is a Turkish dialect. This view on Azerbaijani language currently dominates in Turkey. The "dialect of Azerbaijan" is denigrated by contrasting with the "Istanbul dialect", accepted as "the basis of Turkish language", and, consequently, it is associated with rural people and becomes a source for humour. In turn, this connection opens the avenue for association with "the humour related to peasantry and womanhood" (Sanders 2001).

Treating the popular dialects as a subject of derision is an old tradition in Turkey, which becomes even sometimes a political factor. In this tradition, making fun of a subject decreases its influence and value (Belge 2008: 360-361).

The Azerbaijani language being viewed as a "dialect" and turning into a source of humour, loses respectively its status as a fully recognised language. The idea that Turkic societies should speak the Istanbul version of Turkish, and that the latter is the normative, literary form of Common Turkic, is clearly expressed in the following quote:

> *One of the initiatives to spread the common usage of Turkish among Turkish (i.e. Turkic) societies is Turkey's and Azerbaijan's joint effort to institute the 34-letter Turkish alphabet in 1993. Also, there have been some efforts to write a common history for the Turks. There have been some activities since the 1990s to teach this history and culture and to spread the usage of the Turkish language in many Turkish (Turkic) republics and autonomous regions by means of the "Turkology Project" that the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) has carried out. Certainly, it is useful for other Turkish (Turkic) countries to have Turkey's Turkish as a literary language* (Gömeç 2007: 119-120).

The national ideology of Turkish Republic, which considers itself the leader of the Turkic communities, views the others as "brothers" in a "single nation" with Turkey, of course, as the "big brother" and "protector". Turkey considers itself the most advanced nation in terms of civilisation and culture and sees its role in teaching its "advanced" culture to these "Outside Turks" who barely survived from Russian "captivity".

Turkey, the "Protector" and "Big Brother"

Although the "Single Nation, Two States" slogan and accompanying emphasis on "brotherhood" imply the sharing of a homogenous culture, simultaneously they have an implicit sense of "otherisation". The concept of "outside" makes a reference to a "Turkishness" that is separate from "us". The myth of sharing the same origin and the widely circulated term of "bortherhood" actually serve no significant purpose other than building a "me(us)/others" dichotomy. In terms of the "Turkishness" ideology in Turkey, which places its own national identity at the centre, "Outside Turks" are viewed as passive societies. Cf.:

> *Since the Turkish Republic is the inheritor of the great Ottoman Empire and has had influence over Eurasia for many years, the country has a greater right to express her ideas and speak on behalf of the region than anyone else here. Also, during a period in which Turkey lost its strategic significance for institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, its resulting exclusion has caused Turkey's relationship with the Turkish world to become extremely important* (Gömeç, 2007: 120).

Turkey's hegemonic attitude results from its approach as the "protector" of Turkic-speaking countries, including the Azerbaijan Republic.

Armenia as the Breaking Point of Turkey—Azerbaijan Relations

Although the mode of relations between the Turks in Turkey and the Turkophone Muslims of the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan Repubic) has radically shifted from antagonism and enmity to an expression of "brotherhood" after the emergence of the independent republic of Azerbaijan, still their relationship remains fragile and inconsistent, especially since Heydar Aliev came to power in 2002. In fact, the real relations between these two Turkic-speaking groups of the region begin upon the disintegration of the USSR. The previous history of their mutual ties, as we mentioned above, was nothing else than a constant chain of bloody events and atrocities. In spite of the policy of "Zero Problems with Neighbouring Countries" of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Party*, which came to power in Turkey on November 3, 2002, the relations of Turkey with Azerbaijan have never reached the desired level. In 2009, a crisis occurred between the two countries regarding the humiliation of the flags, as they each consider them as "holy symbols". Armenia, which both Turkey and Azerbaijan have placed in the category of "enemy", has been blamed as the apparent cause of the crisis.

This crisis began with the convergence process between Armenia and Turkey that sought to normalise their relations. Azerbaijan reacted negatively. Baku claimed that "the relationship between Ankara and Yerevan should not be normalised as long as the armed forces of Armenia remain in the invaded lands of Azerbaijan" and stated that this situation "does not fit the national interest of Azerbaijan". The Turkish government prohibited the waving of Azerbaijan's flags during the Turkey-Armenian football match on October 14, 2009, and, as a response, the Turkish flags at the Turkish Martyr's Memorial in Baku were removed. This situation has caused tension between the two countries[4].

[4] The tension was described in the Turkish press in the following terms: "Aliyev removed the flags and silenced the Azan... The protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia have led the leaders of Azerbaijan to commit unbelievable acts... They have removed the flags at the Turkish Martyr's Memorial in Baku and closed two mosques that the Religious Affairs Foundation built and opened for service... We will not ignore the disrespect that these people have showed against Mehmetçik (Robins), who defended Baku against the Russians and who were martyred... They silence the Azan by closing the mosques. And then they defend the idea that we are a single nation. They do not know that the crescent on the flag represents Islam and the star represents Turks. What is strange here is that they are not concerned with learning and embracing [friends]. It is clear that the Azan they silenced does not have any meaning for the Azerbaijani government" (Bayrak indiren, Ezan susturan Aliyev. Available at: http://www.medyatrabzon.com/author_article_print.php?id=2749).

The Azerbaijani government has stated that the removal of the Turkish flags was related to the newly issued Flag Law. Turkey has not been indifferent to this situation, and various leaders made statements demanding it be reversed, including then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. He stated during a visit to Baku that "we consider the invaded Azerbaijani lands as our own. If necessary, 72 million people of Anatolia are ready to die in Azerbaijan today. Keep this in mind". Davutoğlu has also viewed the actions regarding the Azerbaijani flags as a provocation (Gaytancıoğlu 2010: 47-48).

In the meantime, Sayyad Salahlı, then Istanbul Consul General of Azerbaijan, stated that not only the Turkish but also the Azerbaijani flags had been removed from the Memorial for "repair" purposes. Turkish Centre for International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TÜRKSAM) chairman Sinan Oğan also argued that referring to Turkey and Azerbaijan with the slogan "Single Nation, Two States" may have disturbed some countries. He also considered the throwing of Azerbaijani flags in a box labeled "WC for ladies and gentlemen" during the football match between the Turkish and Armenian national teams in Bursa as a provocation (Gaytancıoğlu 2010: 48).

The official spokesmen of Turkey and Azerbaijan have blamed provocateur parties regarding the latest developments in the crisis between the two countries, attempting to reflect relations as having normalised. However, the incidents have revealed underlying tension, despite declarations about the "single nation" and "brotherhood".

Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis in Turkish Textbooks

Despite the intensity of the "single nation" cliché in daily and political life of Azerbaijan, it does not occupy as significant a place in Turkish political and popular discourse, which is reflected also in the textbooks. At different stages of Turkish primary and secondary education and in various spheres, including social sciences, history and geography, Azerbaijan, *sui generis* has not been considered a unique country. Instead, it is mentioned as part of the identity of the Turkish Republic (Erdoğdu 1996).

In history textbooks, Azerbaijan is not directly discussed. Indirectly and implicitly, Ottoman/Turkish and Safavid/Azerbaijani relations are mentioned within the context of the Safavid-Ottoman conflict, with negative references to the Safavids led by Şah Ismail. According to the seventh grade history textbook, "Safavids in Iran were engaging in activities aimed at the disintegration of Anatolia and the spread of

Shi'ism".[5] The "Turkish World Handbook" (*Türk Dünyası El Kitabı*) (Devlet 1992: 73), used as a supplementary manual, states that Azerbaijanis are religiously a different people but those living in the Republic of Azerbaijan feel a stronger connection with Turkey:

> *According to 1987 data, Azerbaijanis who constitute 90% of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan differ from other Turkic societies in terms of geography, strategic importance and population. Another element that differentiates Azerbaijan from other Turkic countries is that most of its people are Shi'ite Muslims (70%), which brings them closer to Iran. However, we should note that national feelings were stronger than religious consciousness in Soviet Azerbaijan. In that sense, they feel closer to Turkey.*

Türk Dünyası Tarihi ve Türk Medeniyetleri Üzerine Düşünceler (Köseoğlu 1991: 753-754), which is also used as a supplementary textbook, provides brief information about the national history of Azerbaijan. Russians are viewed as invaders in accordance with the general approach in Turkey:

> *At the beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijan had a vibrant economy and cultural life. Azerbaijani intellectuals led Turks in Russia on the issues of "Turkishness" and political independence. After the Russian rebellion, Azerbaijan was declared a Turkish Republic on May 28, 1918 under the leadership of Mehmet Emin Resülzade. Istanbul's government recognised the government immediately and supported it with the army led by Nuri Pasha. The Caucasian Islamic Army laid siege to Baku, which was under control of local Soviets, and they entered the city on September 19, 1919. The national government worked to gain recognition from European countries; some allies recognised the Azerbaijani republic. However, the Bolshevik army's invasion of Azerbaijan on April 27, 1920 could not be prevented. As a result, the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic was formed.*

Azerbaijan is considered in a relatively unbiased manner in the subject of geography. These textbooks and the supplementary resources include basic information about the Azerbaijan's geographic location, economy, and demographic structure. For instance, Güngördü (2006: 43)[6] has the following short note on Azerbaijan in his *Devletler Coğrafyası*: "Today, the Azerbaijan Republic is a Turkish state that has been recognised by most of the countries in the world and is a member of international organisations, such as CE and CSCE".

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[5] See 7. Sınıf 3. Ünite Türk Tarihinde Yolculuk 4. Bölüm. Available at: http://trtarih.com/turk-tarihinde-yolculuk/7.-sinif-3.-unite-turk-tarihinde-yolculuk-konu-anlatimi-4.-bolum.html.

[6] For other geography textbooks with similar information, see Devrimci et al. 1951.

On the topic of modern Turkish literature outside Turkey, Azerbaijan is cursorily named in the textbook "Edebiyat–3" (Literature -3) prepared by Mahir Ünlü and Ömer Özcan (2001: 185). It mentions the drama *Ölüler* (The Dead) by Celil Mehmet Kulizâde under the topic of "Azerbaijani Turkish Literature". The book also includes a poem by Azerbaijani poet Vahapzade entitled "Başlangıç".

In addition to the information used to introduce Azerbaijan, the primary education fourth grade social science textbook refers to the "friendship" and "brotherhood" between Turkey and Azerbaijan (Kolukısa et al. 2005: 201-203). It also includes a map of this country. The sixth grade social science textbook, with the same publisher, contains information regarding Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan under the heading "Turkish Republics". It also refers to "the common cultures of the Turkish world" and includes a map of it (Kolukısa et al. 2006: 98-103).

Conclusion

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have gained an impressive economic and political dimension, which has particularly been intensified with the establishment of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline.

Although the "Single Nation, Two States" formulation seems to indicate "equality", it actually shows itself to imply some other connotations when examined carefully.

The structural transformation in the relationship between these two countries shows itself directly in Turkish textbooks, reflecting the meaning attributed to Azerbaijan in Turkey's nation-state ideology. Although primarily positive, these favourable references are not sufficiently in line with the principles of Turkish ideology. Moreover, the material provided by the textbooks clearly shows that centuries-long antagonism between the two turkophone groups with different historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious substrates, formed in two distant geographical environments, still exist, and perspectives of creating a common national ideology against such a historical background are highly vague. The common clichés about a "single nation", "One nation, Two States", "brotherhood", etc. are, in fact, indications of a sort of "otherisation".

Turkey locates its national identity, as the criterion, at the centre of the "Turkish (i.e. Turkic) World". Turkish language is also central; Azerbaijani is reduced to a dialect of Turkish, degraded by that to a source of humour.

In contrast to the expression of "brotherhood" and the idea of "single nation" repeated within political and academic environments, Turkish textbooks have not portrayed Azerbaijan in the same light. They do not describe this country as an independent state but place it on a low rung within the hierarchal order with regard to Turkey. The "brotherhood" emphasis that we see in the discursive level actually functions to cover the hegemony and "otherisation" process, which the ideology of the Turkish nation-state promotes.

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